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Developing Authority in Student Writing through Written Peer Critique in the Disciplines

Essay

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Abstract

In this article, we provide a theoretical framework for understanding how written peer critique can be used successfully to develop authority in students' writing in the disciplines. We suggest that having students respond to their peers in writing rather than orally and positioning students to write their critiques from a strong knowledge base are key elements in making peer critique valuable to the responder. We describe the use of written peer critique in a second-year communications studies course and discuss examples from students' critiques of summaries written by their peers. A strong authorial presence is revealed in three main areas: students' evaluative comments related to disciplinary content; students' evaluative comments on their peers' handling of the summary genre; and students' personal authority derived from their experience as readers.

Developing Authority in Student Writing through Written Peer Critique in the Disciplines

Students come to university as "strangers" to the academic conversation (Maimon, 1979); however, there is no one-style-fits-all discourse that students can learn and use successfully in all their classes. Each discipline has its own set of conventions in which particular ways of constructing and communicating knowledge are embedded. In learning a particular academic discourse, students must come to understand what research questions are appropriate, what counts as acceptable evidence, and the ways in which sources may be used in building arguments. They must also begin to master the specialized terminology and the myriad nuances of expression that mark a discipline, including subtle conventions regulating the use of personal pronouns, references to the literature, and the inclusion or exclusion of certain kinds of information in a paper (Giltrow & Valiquette, 1991). As instructors, one of our challenges is teaching students to become participants in our disciplinary conversations, to understand the discourse conventions in our disciplines, and to write with confidence and authority. In this article, we propose the use of written peer critique—the practice of having students read and comment on the work of their classmates—as a means for instructors to help students learn to engage in academic discourse with authority.

Over the past several decades, peer critique has become a popular pedagogical strategy aimed at helping students improve their papers based on comments from their peers. The literature suggests that peer response encourages students to revise more substantively (Gere & Abbott, 1985; Herrington & Cadman, 1991), to become more sensitive to their audience, to improve their critical reading and evaluation skills, and to expand their understanding of the range of acceptable approaches in writing (Gere & Abbott, 1985).

Although peer critique is often done in groups in which students respond orally to the work of other students in the group (e.g. Gere & Abbott, 1985; Herrington & Cadman, 1991), many researchers advocate written peer response (e.g. George, 1984; Halden-Sullivan, 1996; Holt, 1992; Wauters, 1988). However, with the notable exception of Herrington and Cadman (1991), the literature addresses the use of peer critique in writing classes and does not examine its use in developing disciplinary knowledge or discourse skills in content-area courses. Moreover, the literature focuses primarily on the benefits to the writers of the texts being critiqued rather than to the student responders. In this article, we focus on how written peer critique can help student responders to develop a confident and authoritative voice and identity as they begin to enter our disciplinary conversations. We argue that two factors are key in the success of peer critiques as a vehicle for developing authority: positioning students to write their critiques from a strong knowledge base and having them respond in writing to their peers' work.

Theoretical Framework

When instructors assign academic writing in content-area courses, they seek to have students take up particular academic identities by using conventions associated with their disciplines, for example, asking relevant research questions, employing terminology from the discipline, using certain kinds of sources, and documenting sources scrupulously. But even when students begin to shape their papers according to these conventions, they do not always manage to write with authority.

As Clark and Ivanic (1997) point out, authority can be seen in the degree to which writers take up the identities inscribed in a particular set of conventions and position themselves as members of a particular group. They identify three representations of self that appear in written texts: the autobiographical self, the discoursal self, and the authorial self. The autobiographical self refers to a writer's life history, experiences, values, and beliefs. It is a constellation of factors that shapes a writer's sense of competence and authority as a writer in various contexts. The discoursal self is the writer's representation of self through writing practices, discourses invoked, and discursive features in a text. Through their generic, rhetorical, and stylistic choices, writers take on the identities made available by particular discourse conventions. As Clark and Ivanic's work implies, writers' handling of discourse conventions may also mark them as experts or novices. For example, students may convey their lack of identification with academic discourse through their misuse of citation conventions or specialized terminology or through their failed attempts at employing complex sentence structures in order to sound more academic. Finally, the authorial self refers to the writer's representation of self as someone who has something to say. Clark and Ivanic identify a number of textual features associated with establishing authorial presence in a text. These include the ways in which writers position themselves in relation to authorities and other writers, the extent to which they comment on and evaluate the work of others, their use of modalizations and qualifications, the types of reporting verbs they use with sources, their use of first-person pronouns, and the extent to which they claim authority for their personal experiences. The authorial self, according to Clark and Ivanic, encompasses the textual "evidence of writers' feeling of authoritativeness and sense of themselves as authors" (p. 152).

The work of Walvoord and McCarthy (1990) can also illuminate the concept of authority in student writing. Based on their study of student writing in four disciplines, they identified three roles that students adopt in academic writing: the layperson role, the text-processor role, and the professional-in-training role. Students taking the layperson role address the issues and problems described in an assignment but neglect the knowledge and methodology being taught in the course. Walvoord and McCarthy give an example of a student in a business course who approaches a decision-making assignment about a baseball stadium from the perspective of a baseball fan rather than a business manager. Students taking a text-processor role fail to address the issues or the problems in the assignment and focus instead on some aspect of text-processing, such as summarizing, synthesizing, or reviewing. Here, Walvoord and McCarthy cite an example of a student who summarizes the textbook section on decision-making for the stadium assignment rather than using the requisite methodology to defend his decision. Students adopting a text-processor role may also string together material from various sources without constructing an argument about the assigned problem or topic. Ideally, we want to move our students toward the third role that Walvoord and McCarthy describe, which is that of the professional-in-training. In the professional-in-training role, students use the knowledge and methods from the course as well as knowledge from outside the course to address assigned issues and problems.

These models describing representations of writers in texts suggest that our goal as instructors should be to give students opportunities to develop a sense of themselves as “professionals-in-training” (Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990) by developing an “authorial self” (Clark & Ivanic, 1997) in their texts. We propose written peer critique as a way to do this.

Positioning Students for Effective Written Peer Critique

If we want to hear an authorial voice in student writing, we must ensure that students write their critiques from a strong knowledge base. This knowledge base will be different in different courses, but it should generally include knowledge of disciplinary content and genre conventions. Students have no hope of writing an effective critique in an authoritative voice if they do not understand the material that forms the subject matter for their peers’ writing. When enrolled in a course in a particular discipline, students cannot know all the course material, but they can know aspects of it very well before they undertake critique tasks.

In order to critique others’ work effectively, students must also have an understanding of the relevant genre conventions. Although a number of theorists (e.g., Diaz, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Freedman, 1994) have expressed considerable pessimism about the usefulness of explicit teaching of genre conventions, we believe that lack of explicit teaching of academic genres is one of the factors explaining why students experience confusion in trying to write well for courses in different disciplines. While we agree with Freedman and Diaz et al. (1999) when they argue that learning rules for constructing genres does not ensure that students will use them appropriately, we take the position that expecting students to learn academic genres tacitly through trial and error may slow their progress toward mastering academic genres. As Coe (1994) puts it, “the social processes of tacit genre acquisition [may] serve to limit genre knowledge” (p. 188).

Of course, even when students have sufficient content-area knowledge and a good understanding of the relevant genre conventions, they may still not write with authority. Factors such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, age, and educational attainment may play a role in inhibiting their development of an authoritative voice (Clark & Ivanic, 1997;

Penrose & Geisler, 1994). A deeper barrier, however, may lie in students' epistemological assumptions. As Penrose and Geisler argue, students will be reluctant to take a critical attitude toward sources and to write with authority if they "see all texts (except their own) as containing 'the truth,' rather than as authored and subject to interpretation and criticism" (p. 516). Indeed, for such students, peer critique may be the stepping stone to acknowledging the constructed nature of texts and to assuming authority in their own writing.

More immediate problems for students faced with the task of critiquing a peer's paper are determining what constitutes effective commentary for a writer who may use the feedback in revising, and finding an appropriate tone in which to frame critical comments. In any particular course, both students and instructors can generate a list of the features of an effective critique. If instructors do not provide guidance in what is expected in a peer critique, students may simply focus on grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors in their peers' writing (Flynn, 1984). While such surface errors may distract readers, they should not become the main focus in peer critiques. And while instructor and students may collaboratively develop a list of considerations to guide peer responders, students will have no chance to develop an authoritative voice if the assigned peer critique takes the form of a series of ticks on a checklist of criteria (Halden-Sullivan, 1996). Of course, what counts as an effective peer critique will depend on the academic context; at a minimum, however, a critique should address content, comment on strengths in the critiqued writing, and suggest areas for improvement. It should also offer a genuine reader response to the text.

Peer Critique in Barbara's Communications Studies Course

In Barbara's second-year course *Cultural Studies in Communication,* for communications studies students, one of the early readings in the course was a difficult essay by Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary" (1958/1997). Students were assigned to write a one-page summary capturing the main points of the essay and to develop three questions for class discussion based on it. The audience specified for the summary was a hypothetical classmate who had missed the class on the reading and needed help to understand it. To help prepare students for writing (and later critiquing) their summaries, Barbara spent class time having students generate a list of the features of an effective summary given the context specified. Students were asked to bring copies of their summaries to class the following week.

The next week, the class began with a discussion of Williams' essay. Barbara divided the class into groups, assigned each group a section of the essay, and asked each group to discuss that section, develop a joint understanding of it, and present their thoughts to the rest of the class. The whole class discussion also considered questions suggested by the students. After the discussion, Barbara collected the summaries and redistributed them randomly for peer critique. Before having students begin the critique task, she asked the class to generate a list of features of an effective critique, which she recorded on the board. She then asked the students to write a memo critiquing the summary they received. Both the summaries and the peer critiques were identified only by student number.

The peer critiques written in Barbara's class embodied a strong authorial presence revealed in three main areas. First, the authorial self was distinct in students' evaluative comments related to disciplinary content, in particular in their comments on how accurately and completely their peers' summaries had captured the key ideas in Williams' essay. Second, authorial presence was evident in students' evaluative comments on their peers' handling of the summary genre. Finally, authorial presence

was established as students drew on personal authority derived from their experience as readers.

Authorial Presence in Students' Comments on the Content of Their Peers' Summaries

In the following excerpts from students' critiques of their peers' summaries of the Raymond Williams article, we see students adopting an authoritative stance as they comment on how well the summaries captured the main points in Williams's essay:

> The analysis of Williams is very well done. The only comment that I would present is that Williams does not think that industrialization is bad, instead he felt the industrialization is positive.
>
> Great job of nailing the purpose of this article right on the head. Williams is refuting the theory of mass culture, and defining what his view of culture is.
>
> You should have mentioned mass society and mass culture theories (not the theories themselves but noted that the article is about them) and that he [Williams] was debunking them.
>
> You provided a very clear and concise summary of what the article was about, especially at the beginning. . . . [However] I must admit that I wish you had expanded a little more on the views of Marx and Leavis that Williams had been exposed to.

Even when students did not address their peers directly, as in the following critique excerpt, the sense of authority—the authorial self—is clearly present:

> My peer states [that Williams] "dismisses the definition of culture as the behavior and manners of upper classes." This is an underlying perception in the article; however, Williams' reason for this definition was more distinct and direct than the examples given in the summary.

A final excerpt combines the sense of authorial confidence with a personal note:

> "You have exposed a psycho-political agenda in the article that I didn't notice!"

In the excerpts above, the confident academic voice and the sense of disciplinary understanding conveyed through the students' comments are unmistakable.

All these excerpts indicate the value of positioning student writers to critique from a strong knowledge base. In this case, the students in Barbara's class gained a good understanding of Williams' essay not only through their own attempt to summarize the article but also through the class discussion that preceded the writing of the critiques. This preparation enabled them to comment confidently on whether their peer's summary had captured Williams' main points. This confidence is evident in students' comments on the value of what was included in the summary and in their request for clarification or more detail on points that had been misunderstood or left out. The critique assignment encouraged students to think critically about the summaries they were reading and gave them an opportunity to check their own understanding of Williams' essay against someone else's, forcing them to reevaluate and thereby deepen their own understanding of Williams' arguments.

Authorial Presence in Students' Comments on Their Peers' Handling of the Summary Genre

In their critiques, Barbara's students also commented with authority on the effectiveness of their peers' handling of the summary genre and of their peers' writing styles. In some cases, the comments offered praise:

> Your paraphrasing skills are excellent.
>
> Nice transition paragraph between the drinking hole/teashop mentalities and the main cultural influences (Marxism & Leavis) in [Williams'] life.

In other cases, the students confidently pointed to problems or offered suggestions for improvement, as in the following excerpts:

> A very brief and clear introduction telling me as the reader what Williams' article is about. . . . Your summary was quite clear and to the point. But, a recommendation is in your next summary, do have a concluding paragraph.
>
> This summary seems to be half critique and half summary.
>
> I don't think the sentence "People need . . ." came from William's [sic]article. It's ok to have it there but make sure the reader knows if it's your editorializing . . . or if it's what Williams actually said.

One student even commented on the lack of authority in her peer's writing:

> Your style of writing when you summarized the Marxist and Leavis['] criticisms is clear and confident. Before this however, I found your writing to appear appollogetic [sic] and tentitive [sic]. . . . Can I suggest avoiding such statements as . . ."from what I understand."

When students write their critiques from a sound base of knowledge of the relevant genre conventions, they do not have to guess whether their peers' grasp of the genre is appropriate. Explicit teaching of conventions positions students to comment with an authoritative voice on others' use of the discourse conventions; it also strengthens their own understanding of the conventions, thereby developing their discoursal selves (Clark & Ivanic, 1997).

Authorial Presence in Students' Comments Drawing on Their Experience As Readers

Peer critique allows students to draw on the authority of their own experience as readers. In Barbara's class, the authority of this position was reinforced by the assignment's specification of a peer audience for the summary assignment. In the following comments, we can see the students' confident authorial presence as they offer personal reactions to their peers' summaries:

> Wow! I really appreciated the way you broke down the theories being argued against and the arguments of the author. This format is straightforward and easy to understand.
>
> I like the way you boiled everything down to a few sentences. This is actually

> very useful in learning simply the main points of the article.
>
> I really like your summary of the Marxist side and Williams[']' counter argument. It is way clearer to me after reading your summary.
>
> While reading your summary I felt relaxed & at ease—contrary to what I felt while reading the article. . . . I must admit that I wish you had expanded a little more on the views of Marx and Leavis that Williams had been exposed to. For me that was the most complex part of the composition so a little clarification would have been appreciated.

In the following critique excerpts, the authority of the reading experience provided grounds for critical comments as students noted how problems or lapses in the text led to problems for them as readers:

> I found that the ideas [in the summary] did not flow together the way they should. This caused some confusion on my part.
>
> Your summary didn't give me many details of William's [sic] argument . . . which would have helped me to evaluate the strengths of his argument; I guess I like a certain amount of precision in academic pieces.

In these excerpts, we see how the students' autobiographical selves—through their reading experiences—inform a strong authorial presence in their critiques.

As Clark and Ivanic's (1997) model points out, students arrive in our classes with a history of reading and writing experiences that they call on and integrate to develop an authorial self. As students begin to immerse themselves in the literate practices of their disciplines, they must seek ways to integrate their autobiographical selves with the subject positions offered by academic discourse. That integration is not always an easy task (Harvey, 1994), particularly as the academy tends to suppress the personal element in academic writing (Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Penrose & Geisler, 1994). Peer critique, however, opens a space in which students' personal knowledge and responses as readers are valued. The opportunity afforded by peer critique to develop a sense of authorial presence in responding to texts may turn out to be centrally important in developing authority in students' academic writing. As Penrose and Geisler (1994) argue, even when students possess sufficient domain knowledge to write with authority, they will remain reluctant to do so if they believe that knowledge resides within texts and that their own knowledge, experience, and voice has no legitimacy within the academic sphere.

Tempering the Authorial Voice

Before we go on to consider the epistemological underpinnings and pedagogical implications of authority in student writing, let's look at the ways in which students temper the authorial voice in their peer critiques. In many of the excerpts quoted in this article, students' comments on the completeness and accuracy of their peers' summaries could easily be mistaken for instructors' comments. However, the students' critiques sometimes included a personal voice often lacking in teacher commentary. A more striking feature of the students' critiques can be seen in the ways in which students tempered their authorial voice through the use of politeness hedges. These included framing remarks and qualifications, as evident in the following examples:

> Please forgive me if I have made any unfair judgment. Thank you.

> I found it difficult to understand your second paragraph about the definition of culture. Maybe I am more unclear on the definition than you are, and that is the cause of my confusion.

Students often framed their responses as invitations to the writer to "consider" their "suggestions," and they frequently used modal constructions to qualify their comments: "Maybe you could . . ."; "You might want to . . ."; "It might be better to . . ."; "One suggestion may improve your . . ."; and "I would like to suggest . . . ," to take just a few examples.

While these strategies temper the voice of authority embodied in the critiques, they can be seen as a natural outcome of the rhetorical situation in which students are writing to each other as equals rather than as authorities in a position of power over each other. At first glance, this feature of the students' critiques seems slightly disconcerting but perhaps only because instructor commentary —the voice of critique with which we are most familiar —almost never shows this kind of sensitivity to its student audience. We can barely imagine an instructor ending her comments with a disclaimer like "If you don't agree with any of my comments, feel free to disregard it," as one student wrote in her critique. In fact, although student responders may appear to relinquish authority through hedging remarks, qualifications, and polite constructions, their writing displays an awareness of what it means for their colleagues, and themselves, to develop an authoritative voice and a critical perspective in their writing. As Clark and Ivanic (1997) note, "being considerate to the reader involves making space for the readers' own intentions and interpretations" (p. 168). At some level, these strategies may also reflect a healthy resistance to the kind of comments that students often receive from teachers—comments that speak in the voice of authority to provide ultimate assessments on student texts while closing off avenues for dialogue or competing interpretations.

Epistemological Underpinnings and Pedagogical Implications

The perspective we have taken in this article rests on a set of assumptions that have come to be called the social approach to writing (Faigley, 1985). In this view, writing is not just a means of transmitting existing knowledge but a social activity that "accomplishes meaningful social functions" (Walvoord & McCarthy, 1991, p. 21), including sharing communal ways of thinking and knowing. In teaching newcomers to write appropriately for our disciplinary and professional communities, we socialize them into the ways of thinking and knowing that characterize our disciplines and professions. We bring them into our conversations and help them on their way to becoming literate members of our communities. We also help them to understand that what we are doing in our disciplines and professions is carrying on a conversation—that those impenetrable essays in the journals of our fields are not just isolated pieces of writing; they are contributions to an ongoing exchange of ideas. This social and constructivist understanding of academic work is central if students are to move from an "information-transfer model" of education (Penrose & Geisler, 1994) to a view that sees all texts as contingent and open to response and criticism.

As we have seen, written peer critique can be a valuable tool not only for the writers but also for the student responders as well. Through written critique that is grounded in a strong base of content-area knowledge and a sound understanding of genre conventions, students can begin to develop an authoritative presence and a confident voice in their academic writing. Written peer critique uniquely positions students to write to a real audience of their peers. In the process, students strengthen their disciplinary knowledge base, develop critical reading skills, begin to master genre and academic discourse conventions, and acquire a confident and authoritative voice in their writing. In first- and second-year courses, written peer critique can help initiate students into the

basic discursive genres that constitute our disciplinary conversations and afford them a space in which to develop their own authoritative voices as they comment on their peers' texts. In upper-level courses, written peer critique can provide a forum for a more advanced textual dialogue through which students can expand their range of discursive strategies and sharpen the precision of their expression, the effectiveness of their arguments, and their understanding of complex concepts and relationships in their disciplines. At the simplest level, written peer critique activities promote a real textual conversation among students in our classrooms. But more than that, such activities ask them to write first as members of a community as they compose their original texts and then to engage in a meta-conversation about the ways in which their peers' work is an appropriate contribution to the academic discourse of the classroom or to the larger disciplinary or professional conversation.

Of course, it might be possible to have this meta-conversation orally rather than in writing. But a tenet of the social approach to writing is that people discover and refine their thoughts through the act of writing. Asking students to respond to each other in writing gives them the opportunity to discover that they have something to say in the meta-conversation of their classrooms or in their disciplines or professions, and it allows them the time they need to construct a considered response. Peer critique activities also engage students as participants in a written conversation in which their contribution performs a meaningful social function, that of helping their peers to revise their writing and to deepen their understanding of concepts from their disciplines and of the consequences of their discursive strategies and stylistic choices.

By positioning students to engage in this meta-conversation, written peer critique gives students a uniquely effective opportunity to bring together their autobiographical experiences as readers and their growing understanding of academic or professional discourse conventions to develop their authorial selves and to comment with authority on the work of others. Students who fail to develop a sense of authority in their academic writing may remain trapped in text-processor or layperson roles, subservient to others' knowledge claims and reluctant to adopt the identity of legitimate —albeit novice —members of their disciplines and professions. Written peer critique moves students beyond these limited subject positions by situating them as professionals-in-training (Walvoord & McCarthy,1990) called upon to apply what they have learned to respond with authority to the writing of their peers. As they take up this challenge, they begin their journey toward becoming full members of their disciplines and professions.

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